

# LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

## *Controlled Burnings: Hiller, Latham, Schneemann*

May 4 – June 10, 2023

508 West 24th Street, New York

This exhibition brings together three compelling and provocative artists – Susan Hiller, John Latham and Carolee Schneemann – who coalesced briefly in London at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the '70s. This trio represents not only a metaphorical meeting of minds, but a shared language around ideas of material and conceptual experimentation, as well as destruction and dematerialization in art. Fire is a central motif, with Latham and Schneemann taking a torch to their book and box works respectively – in what he dubbed his *Skoob* works (books spelled backwards) and she called *Controlled Burnings*, which gives the exhibition its title. Hiller also reduced whole bodies of her own paintings to ashes, storing them in glass vials for her longstanding, annual *Relics* series, shown here as the incendiary *Hand Grenades* (1972). If painting was one of many starting points for all three artists, it was the eventual transformation of their extensive object-based, conceptual and performative practices through the ritualistic use of, not just flame, but spit, glue, violence and dreams (to name just a few of the alchemical forces involved), which ultimately grouped them together as pioneers of an emerging, alternative and transgressive international art scene.

The earliest works here are Latham's paintings featuring metallic or machinic fragments and configurations of books – variously splayed, burned and sprayed – as though knowledge itself had been distorted and stuck in place for so long that only a radical baptism of fire could rewire and release its messages anew. Schneemann's box constructions from the same era are flame-licked interior worlds, containing personal memorabilia and studio detritus alongside shards of self-reflexive glass and mirror. Hiller's handprint paintings, cut and sewn-up canvas blocks and *Home* assemblage, all tackling gender stereotyped notions around art making, also suggest an annihilation of art-historical precursors, especially of self-portraiture and auto-biographical tropes.

If Schneemann's early sculptural constructions of broken glass and burnt wood were made in advance of her move to London, it was during this time that she sought to go beyond the assemblage into works that moved off the canvas or the wall, as in *One Window is Clear* (1965), in which audio tape spills onto the floor, evoking a soundtrack no longer heard. Entering increasingly into the realms of performance and dance, a *Controlled Burning* box work of 1962 pays homage to Yvonne Rainer, who performed in Schneemann's first piece for the Living Theater, *Glass Environment for Sound and Motion* (1962), and who would take part in many more Judson Theater performances. Schneemann first visited London in 1964 to stage her famous and controversial *Meat Joy*, which would bring what she called "flesh jubilation" to the UK and led to her returning five years later for an extended and highly productive period.

Latham too was entering the most provocative phase of his career, staging the *Skoob Tower Ceremonies* (1964-68) – burning three-meter-high stacks of books outside the Law Courts, the British Museum and at the 'Destruction in Art Symposium' of 1966. This was the same year in which he performed the *Spit and Chew* event that saw him fired from his teaching post, for masticating and distilling the pages of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* with his students.

Hiller moved to London from the US a year or so before her 'Fluxus Friend' Schneemann, forming part of a cadre of outspoken artists foregrounding feminist discourse, performance, female representation and solidarity. This fervent atmosphere of collaborative discussion and practice orbited many innovative Sixties London venues such as Gallery House (now Goethe-Institut), AMP (Art Meeting Place) and Arts Lab, where Schneemann lived briefly upon her arrival in 1969. There were also independent, like-minded spaces, such as the short-lived Signals as well as Lisson Gallery, where Latham showed from 1970 onwards and where Schneemann met her partner-to-be, the artist Anthony McCall.

Together and separately, these artists interrogated and deconstructed the act of painting and sculpting into performative, ritualized and bodily potential – fueled by fire, threatened by existential danger and united by radicality.

## About the artists

With a multimedia practice extending over 50 years, **Susan Hiller** (1940-2019) was one of the most influential artists of her generation. Since first making innovative use of audio and visual technology in the early 1980s, her groundbreaking installations, multi-screen videos and audio works have achieved international recognition. Each of Hiller's works is based on specific cultural artefacts from our society, which are used as basic materials. Many pieces explore the liminality of certain phenomena including the practice of automatic writing (*Sisters of Menon*, 1972/79), near death experiences (*Channels*, 2013) and collective experiences of unconscious, subconscious and paranormal activity (*Belshazzar's Feast*, 1983-4; *Psi Girls*, 1999; *Witness*, 2000). Her psychologically charged and thematically varied practice amounts to an impassioned plea for the joys and mysteries associated with irrationality.

**John Latham** (1921–2006) was a pioneer of British conceptual art, who, through painting, sculpture, performances, assemblages, films, installation and his extensive writings, courted controversy and continues to inspire. For Latham all artworks were considered events and were activated as such through diverse processes ranging from spraying, chewing, shredding or spitting to simply declaring. Whether in his early spray paintings and *One-Second Drawings*, to the book reliefs he created in the 1960s, the roller paintings of the 1970s and the late glass towers works which incorporated bits of all theorems, Latham maintained steadfast devotion to exploring the most complex cosmological ideas and questioning the traditional notions and structures of art, science and philosophy.

**Carolee Schneemann** (1939-2019) employed various artistic media and objects to develop a rich and influential body of work concerning politics, narrative, sexuality and the representation of women in art and society. Emerging from experimental film, dance, poetry, Fluxus, Happenings and environments, the artist's early painting, collage, assemblage and box constructions were partly an effort to free artistic practice from the static object. Incorporating her nude body into performances extended that investigation into the liberation of the female image. Known for her legendary, visceral and taboo performances, including *Meat Joy* (1964), *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973-76) and *Interior Scroll* (1975), Schneemann paved the way for generations of feminist artists. She documented her performances using film, created kinetic painting-sculptures and video art on such diverse topics as gender, eroticism, desire, disasters and war.

## About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as a new gallery in Los Angeles, recently opened on 15 April. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

For press enquiries, please contact

David Simantov, Communications Manager  
+1 212 505 6431 (Office)  
+1 917 243 9933 (Cell)  
davids@lissongallery.com

i: @lisson\_gallery  
t: @Lisson\_Gallery  
fb: LissonGallery  
lissongallery.com